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BENVENUTO CELLINI: THE MAN AND HIS ART

Pleasantly confident that he is one of the greatest men and artists who ever lived, Benvenuto Cellini,—goldsmith, sculptor, and writer, —dictates to his amanuensis the story of his life as he chisels away at a statue for the Grand Duke. This autobiography, one of the most fascinating in existence, divides itself into three parts,—his life in Italy from his birth in the year 1500 up to the age of forty, his five years in France, and the remainder of his life in Florence.

The first, which occupies a good half of the book, is the most interesting of the three, from the picture it gives of his own personality and the interesting glimpses of the manners of the time, although from an artistic standpoint these years of his life are comparatively unimportant. But it is a fascinating picture,—this of the artist life in Rome and Florence amid the polished rudeness of an awakening people, full of enthusiasm, vivacity, and simple credulity, all seen through the eyes of a man in full sympathy with it, keenly alive and on the alert for everything life had to offer, a man of violent passions, hot-headed, sensual, yet with a mind and eye eager for the finest things, a man who breathes the spirit of that most fascinating of all periods in history, the Italian Renaissance.

It is the story of a life guided entirely by two motives. The first and most important is his overwhelming egoism. To call him conceited is to offer him almost an insult. It ceases to be conceit, it is a conviction on his part that he is one of the greatest men if not the greatest man who will ever adorn the pages of history. The tone of the whole book is struck on the first page. He tells us that "Julius Cæsar had among his captains a man of highest rank and valor who was called Fiorino of Cellino." The soldiers who went to see him referred to his quarters at the foot of the hill of Fiesole as "Fiorenze, as well because the said captain was called Fiorino as because the place he had chosen for his quarters was very rich in flowers." Whereupon Cæsar, in order to compliment his captain called the place Florence, and so it has continued. Thus Cellini

smilingly assures us that his native city is named after an illustrious member of his family. And *sic esto perpetua* is the tone of all that follows: let many great and excellent things take their titles from Benvenuto Cellini, more illustrious still. He goes on to say that at his birth and during his childhood several strange portents and miracles were seen. Such things are usual at the birth and childhood of demi-gods.

The other guiding motive of his life is a passionate, intense worship of beauty. Made less effectual by his egoism, falsified by misunderstanding and by a feverish desire for praise, it still burns through all his life. And in many ways it covers a multitude of his sins. Cellini honestly worked to make his art beautiful, and never set about creating anything which he thought beforehand would be ugly or graceless,—not from any moral sense, to be sure, but because the thought of it was intolerable. This quality must be taken at its face value, such as that is. Try to idealize it, and show that his worship of beauty was the cause or effect of a like quality in his life, and you run hopelessly off the track. It was an unphilosophic and unmoral force, but a force, nevertheless, that he neither cared to nor could put down.

As he found no moral inspiration in the work which was his life, so he found little elsewhere. Judged even by the lax standards of his time, his conduct was often reprehensible, to say the least, and since he had as little caution as moral restraint his hasty passions often got him into trouble. Molinier tries to defend his homicides on the ground of these low standards and sagely remarks, “au sixième siècle c’est le seul moyen de se faire respecter.” It seems to me that the excellent Frenchman might have spared himself the trouble. Cellini was a man for whom the moral aspect of things seems to have no interest or appeal whatever.

The early part of his life was spent in Rome and Florence, wherever he found shops offering the best employ, or later, wherever he found the most appreciative and generous patrons. Pope Clement VII took a strong fancy to him, both on account of his work and for the aid he had given during the siege of the city. Accordingly he lived in Rome in peace and prosperity

for some time. But with the death of Clement VII and the accession of Paul III, Rome no longer smiled on him. Clement, he tells us, had once said privately to a friend, "He is the greatest artist who was ever born in his own craft. Some day when we are together I will show you some of his marvelous works." (Cellini neglects to mention just how he learned of this interview.) Paul, however, spurred on by his illegitimate son Luigi, had thrown the erstwhile favorite into prison on an apparently false charge of stealing some of the papal jewels from Clement. Escaping after three years confinement he was glad enough to avail himself of the influence of Francis I and Cardinal Ferrara in his behalf, and to accept their invitation to come to France, where he established himself in 1540. He was to receive for his work a salary of seven hundred crowns a year, the same salary as had once been paid to Leonardo da Vinci.

His work up to that time had been entirely limited to that of the goldsmith,—coins, medals, seals, and jewelry. A coin made for Clement is a rather mediocre affair, but something of an advance over the prevalent styles of coinage at that day. A seal made for Cardinal Gonzagua in 1528 shows his style in embryo. The figures, which represent the Assumption of the Virgin, are spaced with an artistic symmetry, though crowded and confused in the style of the sixteenth century, which filled every available space on its decorative bas-reliefs, allowing the eye no place to rest. The theatrical attitudes of the Apostles who stand grouped around the tomb from which the Virgin has just ascended, show a rather unhappy imitation of Michelangelo, which persists in Cellini's later work. A medal designed for Cardinal Bembo shows greater promise than either of these two. On the obverse is the profile of the Cardinal with a full flowing beard, splendidly done. The reverse has a rather clumsy figure of Pegasus.

His five years in France are marked by three important productions, the nymph of Fontainebleau, the gold salt-cellar, and the Jupiter. Cellini considered the last his best work at this period, a fact which makes its loss particularly unfortunate.

The semicircular bas-relief of the nymph was made to go

over the door of the palace at Fontainebleau, Francis's favorite residence. The nude figure of the nymph reclines with one arm about the neck of a stag, while several other animals symbolical of the chase are grouped in the upper part of the piece. The figures are crowded, the face of the nymph is expressionless, her legs are unnaturally long, and the whole composition is marred by poor drawing and a lack of unity. In short, the goldsmith is trying to be a sculptor, and making a fiasco of it. In the sixteenth century the goldsmith's and sculptor's trades were practically distinct. Cellini was a born goldsmith, and his attempts to rise to sculpture were, with a few exceptions, unhappy failures.

The other extant work from this period, the gold salt-cellar of the Vienna museum, shows him more in his proper sphere. This was finished for Francis I after a model made at Rome in 1540 for Cardinal Ferrara. Two nude figures, one of Neptune and the other a female figure of the Earth, are seated above a crowd of dolphins and other sea-animals, which peer out from the edges of a sloping sea. The figures are too large for the rest of the composition, and the attitude of the Earth is somewhat stiff, but the general effect is quite graceful. The exaggerated modeling of the muscles (a fault which appears even more glaringly in the finished Perseus) is again the sign of the uncomprehending imitation of Michelangelo.

After five years in France Cellini's popularity began to wane. Madame d' Etampes, the royal mistress, had taken a dislike to him, and, if his own account is to be believed, used her influence in such a way that his life became not only unpleasant but unsafe. At all events he obtained permission to leave France and returned to Florence, where he took service under the Duke Cosimo I, of the Medici.

Very soon after his arrival he began work on the best known of his statues, Perseus with the head of Medusa, now in the Loggia dei Lanzi at Florence. It represents Perseus in the moment of victory, standing nude, holding his sword in his right hand and with his left lifting up the head of Medusa, on whose prostrate and contorted body he stands. The idea of the statue is a common one, a mythological subject symbolically treated to repre-

sent a political ideal. The changing fortunes of Italian states during the Middle Ages and the Renaissance period made such subjects extremely popular.

The student of the Perseus is particularly lucky in having the wax model at hand as well as the finished statue, and in addition to these a bronze cast, in the Florentine National Museum, which seems to have been made after the model and before the final figure. There was at one time some doubt whether this intermediate cast was the work of Cellini, but the identity of its pose and treatment with those of the wax model has led modern critics to ascribe it to him unanimously. Taken as a whole it is a far better piece of work than the finished statue. It seems to have been executed when the first flush of inspiration was upon the artist. The general simplicity of treatment, the lithe and graceful pose of the body, the balance of the head and head-dress with the rest of the figure, and, best of all, the chastened refinement in the modeling of the muscles are characteristics of this bronze cast which the statue in the Loggia dei Lanzi lacks. Cellini apparently reflected, studied, and made measurements before going on to complete his work. Measurements show that the arms in the bronze cast are too long; in the finished statue they have been shortened. Some critics have condemned the straight line which the raised left arm and the upper part of the right arm form, urging that they give the suggestion of a rapidly revolving windmill, photographed as it turns. I am inclined to disagree with this criticism, but Cellini apparently decided that the position was a bad one, and lowered the left arm to break this line. Whatever one may think of these two changes, the others which have been made are indisputably for the worse. The muscles have been made out of all proportion to the size of the body, and the head-dress has been elaborated until it threatens to topple over, bearing the rest of the figure with it. The abnormal position of the prostrate body of Medusa on which the hero stands has not been improved from the bronze cast, and the blood pouring from her neck has an even more hairy appearance.

Nowhere else in all Cellini's work is the suicidal effect of his imitation of Michelangelo better shown than in the finished

Perseus. The piece is cold, and lacks all of Michelangelo's grandeur as well as his restraint. The school which imitated him shared the failing of all purely imitative schools, they could not see that heroic works can be produced only by heroic conceptions. They could not see that "style is but the expression of the man" and fondly thought that by carefully modeling every muscle and curve in the human body, they could become Michelangelos without troubling themselves to look for the spirit that taught him to model thus.

The base of the statue is too long for the figure and too highly ornamented for its purpose. This elaborate ornamentation, like that on Perseus's cap, is another example of the goldsmith intruding himself upon the sculptor's domain. The four figures with which the base is decorated are still more Michelangesque than the Perseus and, for the most part, of no value. The Minerva and Danaë are without grace and overmodeled. The Mercury, poised on one foot with his hands raised and head turned to one side, is quite prettily conceived but poorly executed. The Jupiter is the most interesting of the four, since from it one may guess at the plan of the colossal Jupiter made in Paris for Francis I. Unfortunately it is very disappointing. The god, with a toga hanging from his shoulder, raises one arm ostensibly to hurl a thunderbolt. Cellini has tried to make it very impressive and has succeeded only in making it rather absurd. This figure serves to illustrate a curious ignorance on Cellini's part of a relationship in the human body. It is a commonplace of figure drawing that when one shoulder is raised, the hip on the other side of the body is also raised slightly, and the whole figure takes on a sort of a double curve, as in the Venus of Milo. This relationship Cellini apparently did not understand, and his Jupiter stands with level hips while his up-raised arm lifts one shoulder considerably above the other.

Another figure in which the same misunderstanding is shown, though it is not so noticeable, is the Ganymede of the Affigi Museum. This simple and graceful statuette is, however, an attractive contrast to the deities at the base of the Perseus, and shows that Cellini was at his best when he worked without care for magnificent or heroic results.

A bust of the Duke, executed soon after the completion of the Perseus, is the best example of Cellini's work in portrait sculpture, a branch of his art in which he essayed very little. The figure is dignified and well-moulded, but the treatment of the bronze with gilt and polychrome is more suited to goldsmith's work than to sculpture, where it gives a decidedly bizarre effect. The heroic aspect seems to be a bit of flattery; it is better suited to the artist than his model.

It was as a goldsmith, however, that we see Cellini in his element, not rising above the faults of his time, but excelling in its virtues. The gilded silver pitcher and the decorated gold flasks of the Pitti palace and the bronze vase of the Corsini gallery, three of his best productions in this line, are all worked with a profuse richness but in perfect taste. The figures are placed with a decorative symmetry, though closely crowded, and are elegantly and delicately worked. In the reliefs the overcrowding is worse, with the result that one usually fails to distinguish individual figures in the solid ripples of silver.

The best example of Cellini's merits, and the best piece by which to point out his faults, conspicuous by their absence, is the bronze bas-relief of a dog, in the National Museum. He tells us that this cast was made while he was working on the Perseus in order to give him experience in working with bronze. Accordingly he had no reputation to sustain, no Michelangelo to imitate, no Duke to satisfy; he worked here for the joy of creation, and the result is a beautiful, unaffected, unexaggerated figure. This bas-relief I must consider his best work. The grace of the underline of the greyhound's body, the fine treatment of the ribs and the lower hind legs, and most of all the exquisite moulding of the head, slightly raised in relief, put this figure above anything else he made. The background is plain, probably more by good luck than good management, for we should expect a litter of puppies, and an array of rags and bones piled together pell-mell, with St. Christopher Cynocephalus presiding over all.

An interesting comparison can be made between this relief and Pisanello's Study of a Dog, executed about one hundred years before Cellini's day. This is a drawing by a man who

knew and loved dogs. He has caught the rugged fineness of the Danish hound admirably, and in the anatomical treatment he shows more familiarity with his subject than does Cellini, who seems to have been troubled in the management of the clavicle and the upper hind leg. But Pisanello's drawing, for all its correctness, lacks the subtle grace and affection that Cellini has expressed so beautifully.

Here as elsewhere, he is at his best when taken off his guard, most immortal when he least thought to be. And perhaps it is for the same reason that to-day he is less known as the sculptor of the Perseus and the Nymph of Fontainebleau than as the author of the thoughtlessly told autobiography.

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